

DoD News Briefing with Press Secretary Morrell from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, Va.

MR. MORRELL: Good afternoon. Great to see you all today.

I've just come from the Tank, where President Bush spent about an hour and a half this morning meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the latest in a series of meetings the president has had this week with his senior military advisers. On Monday he conferred with Admiral Fallon and General Petraeus. Tuesday, he met with Secretary Gates. And finally, this morning he engaged the Joint Chiefs.

Just as he did last September, Secretary Gates arranged these meetings so the president could hear directly from those responsible for protecting our security interests in Iraq, the Middle East and around the world.

Their decisions -- their discussions, rather, were candid, carefully considered, but they were also pre-decisional, so neither I nor anyone else attending those meetings should be discussing them publicly. However, I can tell you that Secretary Gates believes the president has been given the most up-to-date assessment of the situation in Iraq, analysis of the impact our involvement there is having on our forces globally, and advice on how to proceed from here.

Armed with all that, the president must now decide the way ahead in Iraq. That is obviously a big decision and the president deserves the space to make it, so I will not be addressing the substance of any of those meetings.

Having said that, I'll be happy to take your questions, largely on other subjects, I hope.

Q Geoff, would you say that there is now a consensus among the defense establishment, to include the service chiefs as well as the secretary, that a pause in the withdrawal of troops makes sense and should be part of the approach going forward?

MR. MORRELL: Some of this has been on the record already, so I can speak to it. Obviously, General Petraeus is the one who first floated this notion, of a period of consolidation and evaluation. It was endorsed by Secretary Gates when we were in Iraq a month or so ago. And I know that Admiral Fallon has also publicly expressed his support for that notion.

I do not believe that the Joint Chiefs, the chairman has weighed in publicly on their view of a pause, of this period of consolidation and evaluation.

So I'm not going to betray any confidences in terms of what was discussed in the meetings about a pause, but you can certainly deduce that a large number of the advisers to the president have publicly expressed their support for a period of consolidation and evaluation after the final surge brigades leave Iraq in July.

Q If the chairman and the Joint Chiefs did not share that view, wouldn't that be known?

MR. MORRELL: I think you'd have to talk to the chairman and the chiefs. But I just don't feel comfortable, Bob, discussing publicly something that they have not seen fit to discuss publicly to date. I think they appreciate the fact that their advice to the president should be private and allow him the space and the time necessary to sort of take all the information that's been provided to him and make what is a very consequential decision about the way ahead.

Jonathan?

Q Geoff, what are the risks or the concerns that if we are not able to withdraw more troops after this pause, in terms of the readiness of the force, the stress on the force, and the ability to perhaps, you know, address the situation in Afghanistan if we wanted to beef up now, what are the risks if we are not able to withdraw further?

MR. MORRELL: I don't think I'm going to get into the risks, Jonathan, but I will tell you this. Clearly, when the president sits down to meet with the Joint Chiefs, the discussion there is not just about Iraq, not just about the CENTCOM AOR, but it's about our strategic interest, our security interest around the world. They're responsible not just for those limited areas but for the threats we face globally and the impact of dealing with the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the health of the force.

So suffice it to say that in addition to Iraq, Afghanistan was discussed and obviously the health of the force. It's something the president has long been very concerned about -- the stress of six-plus years of fighting the global war on terror. He is constantly asking the Joint Chiefs about the health of the force, about retention rates, about family life. And so that was a large part of the conversation today.

Yes?

Q Could you expand a little bit on that, on the overstretched force, maybe focusing in the Army? Were they pinpointed discussions on the Army in particular? Could you expand on that in any way? And with Afghanistan, was there any discussion of additional U.S. forces beyond the Marines that are heading there --

MR. MORRELL: I'm not going to get into discussions in terms of future force movements. That just would not be appropriate.

Obviously, any discussion that deals with the health of the force, stress on the force, has to first and foremost address the situation in the Army, where they have been conducting 15-month-long deployments with 12-month dwell time in between. They are obviously bearing a large portion of the load that the military is carrying these days. So the chiefs are mindful of that, the secretary is mindful of that and the president was inquisitive about it. But that's as far as I'll go.

Q That was through this discussion about getting from a 15- month deployment down to 12-month?

MR. MORRELL: Well, I think that General Casey has obviously expressed publicly on numerous occasions, as has the secretary, for that matter, his desire, their desire to reduce tour lengths as soon as possible. I think General Casey has talked publicly about the ability to do that once you hit 15 BCTs -- brigade combat teams -- in Iraq. But that's a decision that has not been made. It's a decision that will be made by the secretary, I am sure, in consultation with the president. But we are not there yet.

Q Presumably that was discussed in the Tank, as well?

MR. MORRELL: I'm not going to discuss it any further.

Thom Shanker.

Q Yeah. There's another surge under way in Iraq today, and that's the surge in violence over the last couple of days. Did this spike in unrest with the Mahdi Army come up today? And more broadly speaking, what is the effect of this violence today on the decision about force levels for the future?

MR. MORRELL: Thom, I'm happy to discuss the Iraqi security forces operations in Basra, but I don't feel comfortable discussing them in the context of discussions that took place today. I can tell you this; that Prime Minister Maliki should be commended for taking the initiative and going after the extremists and criminals in Basra. Citizens down there have been living in a city of chaos and corruption for some time, and they and the prime minister clearly have had enough of it. Fed up last week, Prime Minister Maliki ordered, I believe, five additional battalions down to Basra, increasing Iraqi security force troop levels down there to, I think, around 15,000.

So there is a healthy fighting force down there, and they are conducting aggressive military operations ever since then, trying to rid the city of militias, thugs, smugglers that have been plaguing it for months now. But I think it's very noteworthy that the prime minister, that the government, for that matter, is ready, willing and now able to take the fight to the extremists and to the criminals down there. They were not of this capacity some months ago.

And part of the point of the surge was to give them the time, the training to increase their capability, and they are now displaying it. Our role in this is merely in

support, primarily from the air. This is an Iraqi-led operation, and what's more than that, it is a Shi'a- dominated government going after Shi'a extremists down there, and that is significant.

Q I'd like to follow up on that, if I could. Taking it out of the Tank, then, all of the senior officials, the president, the secretary, the chairman, General Petraeus have all said the success of the surge is fragile. They don't want to put that at risk by premature rapid troop withdrawals. Is the violence of recent days an example of the risk of increased violence, or what I heard you say, it's the example of a success? I just don't understand that.

MR. MORRELL: Tom, it's -- I think it's early in the operation. This has just begun this week. But I think, at this early stage, it looks as though it is a by-product of the success of the surge, in the sense that the Iraqi government has grown and increased in capability to the point where they now feel confident going after extremists -- Shi'a extremists in a part of the country that had been -- that they had not exerted great influence over. And so we, at this point, though still early, would view it as a sign of success.

Q But Geoff, if I can just quickly follow -- I think that what Thom has mentioned with the surge --

MR. MORRELL: He seems satisfied with the answer. You're not?

Q Well, no, because the surge in violence isn't all about Basra. I mean, it's been the -- you know, the sustained attacks on the Green Zone since Sunday. It's been violence elsewhere in the country.

So what -- I mean, that's not, I assume, a product of success.

MR. MORRELL: Well, if there is a reaction based upon aggressive military operations by the Iraqi government in Basra that has been subsequently unleashed, as we've seen in sporadic incidents elsewhere around the country, predominantly in Shi'a areas from Basra up to Baghdad, that is the consequence of what we believe to be the right posture by the Iraqi government, to aggressively go after terrorists and extremists, Sunni or Shi'a alike. I mean, perhaps this is -- obviously, as the -- perhaps this will inspire a greater number of Shi'a to stand up to the extremist elements within their groups, as the Sunni did to the extremist elements within their factions. So that's where we are at this point. It's still early, though.

Q Geoff --

MR. MORRELL: Yeah, go ahead, Andrew.

Q To follow up on Basra, you said that the people of Basra have been living in a city of chaos and corruption for some time. What does that say about the British

decision to withdraw from the city several months ago and the U.S. military's decision not to replace British troops? That would seem to imply that the city was not in good shape when they left.

MR. MORRELL: I think the city has always been dealing with a level of criminality and corruption that no one has been comfortable with. It has not been to a point such that it became a security threat that would undermine the central government.

But obviously Basra is a very important city to Iraq. It is vitally important in terms of their oil operations, which the source of the revenue on which the government sustains itself. So it has clearly gotten to the point now where the prime minister feels as though he has the means and the need to address what has been a festering problem down there.

Barbara?

Q I want to come back to all of this again. You've said -- I think your words were "by-product of success." And of course it was probably something like five years ago that we heard Dan Senor in Baghdad talk about the insurgents attacking success. So my question is not related to the Tank, but do you believe that this outbreak of violence in the last few days is not a factor, not part of any calculation about the U.S. position in Iraq, about the status of our forces there in terms of the surge, in terms of withdrawing additional forces, in terms of continuing the five brigades? Does it impact it at all, or does this just simply exist in -- somewhat in the Iraqi column, in terms of their operations?

MR. MORRELL: I think, Barbara, short answer to a long question is that I would talk to General Petraeus about it and see if it factors into his calculations.

Q Can I follow on that, please?

(Cross talk.)

MR. MORRELL: Joe?

Q You said that the operation against the Jaish al-Mahdi is an Iraqi operation. I would like to know from you how much the Pentagon is confident that the Iraqi army has the capability to face Jaish al-Mahdi and to restore the security in the south.

MR. MORRELL: I think, Joe, more importantly -- and more important than whether we feel as though the Iraqi government has the capability to take on extremist elements of JAM is whether the Iraqi government is confident enough to do so. And clearly they are, and that speaks volumes about far they've come. This is an initiative they would not have taken mere months ago. But they clearly are now of the mind that their fighting force is capable enough, sophisticated enough, to go down and conduct large-scale operations against armed gangs and criminals and extremist elements in Basra.

Q When you said U.S. assistance --

MR. MORRELL: No, let's clear this up. I mean --

Q I just want to follow up on that. You said U.S. assistance is primarily from the air. Are there any U.S. ground forces down there, trainers?

MR. MORRELL: Not to my knowledge. But I'd talk to Baghdad.

Yeah, Nancy? Q I wanted to follow up a couple of points that you made. You said that this is a by-product of the success of the surge, that the Iraqi government now has confidence that their forces can take on these elements. To follow up to Joe's question, if they're wrong, though, if it threatens the cease-fire, it threatens the security situation in Baghdad, and ultimately puts U.S. troops at increased risk potentially; it even threatens the CLCs and how they react to this; if they are -- if the Iraqi government is wrong, doesn't this put the entire successes you see of the surge so far in jeopardy, that things could --

MR. MORRELL: I think that's a big if. It's a big hypothetical. This operation is early on. I'd say let's give them a chance to see if they can do it.

Q But if I could follow --

MR. MORRELL: Yogi (sp)?

Q It's sort of a related question, but from a different stand. General Petraeus has always said there are three factors suppressing the violence: the surge, the Sadr cease-fire, the CLCs.

The surge troops are leaving. There's now open combat between Iraqi government forces and Sadr forces. Many of the CLCs say they're worried about getting jobs, and they may return back into the fray.

If you have those three factors, that have been cited for months as keeping the violence down, all beginning to disappear simultaneously, what's the level of concern that the violence, that had been suppressed, will now spike back up?

MR. MORRELL: I think that's an excellent question for General Petraeus.

I do not think, at this stage, at this stage, which is mere days into this operation, anyone is prepared to stand here and tell you that they feel as though that the gains we've made, over the past several months, are in jeopardy.

I think they would tell you just the opposite, that this is a sign that the Iraqi security forces are now capable of confronting fundamentally their problems. They are a sovereign government. This is a decision they made, and they feel capable of fulfilling.

So we are supportive of them taking greater accountability for their own security. That's the whole point, of our operations there, to stand up the Iraqis to the point where they can defend themselves, govern themselves, sustain themselves. And this could be a sign that they are indeed, that they are indeed getting closer to that point.

Q White House officials have suggested that Iranians are backing these elements, the forces from the South.

Are you seeing any indication that the Iranians are stepping up their efforts in a period where the U.S. is starting to draw down their surge forces?

MR. MORRELL: I mean, I wouldn't want to get into discussions about intelligence.

But I would say to you this, that the Iranians, particularly in the South, have been a constant presence. I mean, obviously there is a Shi'a tie between those two nations, even though there's a divide between Arabs and Persians. But clearly there's long been, even under Saddam's reign, a connection down there. And, but we are not seeing any more, to my knowledge, or any less Iranian influence in that part of the country, to my knowledge. There has been a persistent and troublesome meddling by Iran, not just in Iraq but throughout, I mean, not just in the South of Iraq but throughout the country for that matter, and not just, mind you, on the Shi'a side but on the Sunni side in some cases as well.

Yeah, Al?

Q Geoff -- excuse me, on the Sunni side, what --

MR. MORRELL: The Iranians have played both sides of the fence on this -- in this war we're in.

Yeah?

Q Can you be more specific on the Sunni --

MR. MORRELL: I can't be. They've supported extremists on the Sunni side, just as they've supported extremists on the Shi'a side.

Let me just go to Al. Let's keep this in order.

Q Have you heard any concerns expressed by any of the senior military or civilian officials of the department that you interact with about this increase in violence, and any concern that this could be the erosion of at least one, if not more, of the three stools that Yochi was referring --

MR. MORRELL: Yeah, I think this is a variation on the same theme, and I think, at this

Q Well --

MR. MORRELL: I have nothing further to add for what I've said on that subject.

Q But in terms of what you've heard from folks, I mean, you've either heard concern or you haven't heard concern.

MR. MORRELL: I have not heard the concern to which you all seem to be speaking to. There -- this is a very early operation, and when you take the fight to the enemy, as we've now been doing in the north -- and hence there's been increased violence to the north, as al Qaeda and other extremists up there feel cornered -- you are seeing the same kind of reaction among the Shi'a extremists in the south as the Iraqi government and the armed forces take the fight to them down there. It's a natural reaction to being cornered.

Steve?

Q When you talk about an Iranian support for Sunnis in Iraq, are you suggesting what Senator McCain said the other day might be correct?

MR. MORRELL: I'm not.

Q That they went in there for training and came --

MR. MORRELL: No. No, I'm not. I'm just -- I think -- I'm not speaking of al Qaeda, but I think there has been evidence for months now that they have played both sides of the fence here.

Yeah, Joe?

Q Please, you clarify what you mean by both sides?

MR. MORRELL: Sunni and Shi'a and Shi'a extremists. That's what I mean.

Yeah, go ahead.

Q May I have two quick questions, please? One, as far as the situation in Afghanistan is concerned, from a military point of view, how are you going to tackle the problem there as far as al Qaeda and terrorists are concerned after Musharraf? Because there is a lot of concern in Pakistan now, after having the new government there, that he must go. Are you prepared for that with a new leadership?

MR. MORRELL: Well, that -- well, I think I got you. I mean, my -- our hope clearly is and our belief is that this new government will recognize, as we do, that the enemy we face in Afghanistan -- or Pakistan, rather; pardon me -- is every bit a threat to them as it is to us. And early indications we have are that they indeed do understand that. So we, as always, under Musharraf's rule or under this new government, stand ready, willing and able to assist the Pakistani military, go after extremists, terrorists in their midst.

They say the word; we are there, able to provide forces to train their fighters, to take it to these extremists in the FATA, primarily.

Q And as far as the India-U.S. military-to-military and other engagements are concerned, according to India Globe and other newspaper reports, a lot of things have been going on between the two countries as far as -- the secretary's visit also took place in India. Secretary Gates was there recently.

MR. MORRELL: Yeah, I was with him. Sure. Yeah.

Q And also, a nuclear deal has not yet gone and now -- there was in town yesterday a foreign minister of India. I don't know if he met anybody here or not. But what -- all these things are going on between the two countries as far as fighting this terrorism and al Qaeda. Are you asking India in any way to help the U.S. more in any other areas, as far as fighting against al Qaeda terrorism, or in that nuclear deal?

MR. MORRELL: We enjoyed an excellent trip to Delhi, I guess a month or so ago, in which the secretary met with an array of high- ranking Indian officials, including the prime minister. And we did indeed talk, I think, in virtually every one of those meetings about the importance of collaboration on counterterrorism initiatives. Obviously, India has seen its share of terror, and we want to work with them to confront that threat -- to confront that threat. Okay.

Q Geoff?

MR. MORRELL: Let's go to the back.

Q As a result of an airstrike in the north, it's been reported that -- against what's believed to be al Qaeda hideout -- it's been reported --

MR. MORRELL: The north of which country?

Q In Iraq.

MR. MORRELL: Okay.

Q Back to Iraq. Sorry. It's been reported that a house with eight family members in it were killed as a result of that strike, between them four children. How

accurate do you think these airstrikes are, both in the north and the south, when it comes to residential neighborhoods?

MR. MORRELL: Yeah. I am frankly not familiar with the incident to which you speak -- of which you speak. I can tell you this: that we go to extraordinary lengths to try to minimize and avoid, for that matter, civilian casualties.

These are very precise strikes designed to go after known terrorists, known extremists. And it is obviously -- I mean, there have been and there no doubt will continue to be tragic mistakes, but we go to extraordinary lengths to try to avoid that. And I -- but I'm not familiar with the particular incident which you're citing now.

Yeah, Barbara? Just a couple more.

Q Can you bring us up to date on the incident in the Suez Canal and your -- the department's understanding of why the first reports were that no one had been killed, and now the U.S. government is confirming at least one Egyptian killed and possibly others wounded?

MR. MORRELL: Yeah. Barbara, I know Bryan talked to you guys at length about this today. I, frankly, have not been involved in this as much as I would have liked. I think first reports are not always accurate, and this seems to be a case of that. It does look as though now there was one person on one of the Egyptian boats that was approaching our supply ship as it was about to traverse the Suez Canal, and although that boat was given repeated warnings to keep its distance, they did not heed those warnings, and hence warning shots were actually fired. And it does look as though in the midst of this incident one person lost his or her life. And that is tragic. But I think there's an investigation under way by the 5th Fleet and Egyptian authorities, and I think they will certainly get to the bottom of this.

I can tell you that it just so happens that the secretary had a lunch yesterday with Field Marshall Tantawi, the leader of the Egyptian military, and they enjoyed an excellent discussion about our long-standing and continued cooperation on a military-to-military basis between our two nations, but this was not a subject of discussion during the lunch or in their meetings before.

Gosh, there's great demand and not much time. Tony.

Q I have a quick non-Iraq question involving the Joint Strike Fighter, the Pentagon's largest weapons program.

MR. MORRELL: Yeah. I'm not -- I'm not there for you on that right now. I got nothing for you.

Courtney? Q What's your understanding of the secretary's priorities for future deployments? If he had the opportunity -- or the option between bringing down the

deployment time, extending dwell, versus bringing down the overall troop levels in Iraq, which one's a higher priority for him, deployment time or overall force levels?

MR. MORRELL: I'm not so sure you can do one without the other.

I don't think you can reduce boots-on-the-ground time, increase dwell time unless you reduce numbers in Iraq. So I think they're hand in hand.

Q Well, not necessarily, I mean, because we've heard some arguments made that --

MR. MORRELL: If you wanted the secretary to adhere to his pledge, that he has made to the troops, which is, I'm going to give you predictability. As I'm asking you to do more, when he first came into office, actually last April, he said, I'm going to raise tour lengths to 15 months and give you 12 months dwell time. That's going to extend your duty but it's going to give you predictability in your schedule.

That was painful for him to do. It's been painful on the armed forces or the Army in particular. And he wants to reduce those times, reduce the boots-on-the-ground time, and increase the dwell time as soon as he possibly can. But you cannot do that by sustaining the troop levels you currently have in Iraq. They have to come down in order to give you the flexibility to reduce tour lengths.

Okay, just to be fair, these last two, and then we're going.

Q Could you give us a final assessment on where the talks in NATO are going in terms of increasing the number of troops in Afghanistan? How are the allies doing? Is there a plan, some sort of a model, in this building to make it more like a surge operation? And are the allies cooperating, talks with Turkey, other countries?

MR. MORRELL: I can't -- I can tell you this, that it clearly will be a focus, as it seems to always be, when NATO gathers. Both troop contributions, monetary contributions, other kinds of creative contributions are always a focus of our talks when we gather in NATO for Afghanistan. And it will be again.

Clearly there have been overtures, from a number of allies around the world, about the possibility of announcements in Bucharest, at Bucharest about additional forces being deployed to Afghanistan. But none of that is, at this point, official. I think you may very well see a number of countries step to the plate, as we've been asking them to, dig deep, see what more they can provide.

So we are clearly going to Bucharest anticipating that some of our allies will be able to contribute more to the mission in Afghanistan, as we have, by sending another 3,200, in fact, 3,400 Marines, who have arrived there this month but will only be staying for seven months.

So that, I think, is the status of where we are in terms of additional troop contributions.

Last one.

Q The Pentagon sent an adjustment to its final '08 GWOT supplemental request to the Hill this month. And I'm wondering if that's the final we're going to hear for the lingering '08 request. I've seen the document. I'm just wondering also if --

MR. MORRELL: We sent an adjustment, you're saying, to the '08 request?

Q The '08 request, yes. And I was wondering if that's the final word that the people on the Hill are going to hear in terms of the Pentagon's request; there's going to be anything more official than that? And then also, if after Petraeus and Crocker testify, is it possible that a further adjustment will be sent in response to what they say publicly?

MR. MORRELL: After General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker testify, it's our anticipation to present the Hill with our -- with a clear number, a set number for FY '09 for our Global War on Terror Budget Request for FY '09. If we did present the Hill with an adjusted figure for '08, I have not seen it before it went up. I knew that we were doing such a thing to take into account, but frankly, we presented this number initially to them more than a year ago and are still waiting for the money. And as the time has progressed, prices have changed, fuel and other things, and so we've made adjustments accordingly.

Thanks so much.

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